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# Calling Time—a Reply to John Guillory

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John E. Joseph, *University of Edinburgh*

## ABSTRACT

The essay by Guillory appears to rest on an essential distinction between natural and historical time, correlated with the absence or centrality of reversible monument/documents (a concept taken over from Panofsky), where the sciences inhabit natural time (devoid of monuments/documents) and the humanities inhabit historical time (in which all its objects are monuments/documents). How though is this distinction to be maintained in the face of decades of evidence and arguments from both science and philosophy that would break it down? Bauman credits Panofsky with a strong belief that historical time unites science and the humanities, whence it follows that both scientific and humanistic disciplines deal with monuments and documents—a unity that may be masked by an idealized vision of science as an ahistorical conveyor belt of endless progress.

John Guillory has written an essay that on the face of it seems straightforward but interweaves multiple arguments in an intricate way. One could easily imagine him devoting an entire book to the theme. To manage it in under ten thousand words is quite a feat, but also increases the risk of misconstruing his intentions. So I shall start by summarizing what I take Guillory to be saying.

He wants to fend off assaults on humanities disciplines by asserting that “the humanities” constitutes a unified discipline, rather than a ragtag administrative assemblage of fields that happen not to be sciences. To ground that assertion he looks to the writings of Erwin Panofsky, particularly his 1938 essay “The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline,” the main lines of which Guillory carries over into his own essay.<sup>1</sup> Guillory sets a high bar for his undertaking: “Panofsky’s meditation on the disciplinary object discloses

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1. Erwin Panofsky, “The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline,” in *The Meaning of the Humanities: Five Essays* by Ralph Barton Perry, August Charles Krey, Erwin Panofsky, Robert Lowry Calhoun, Gilbert Chinard, ed. Theodore Meyer Greene, 2nd ed. (1938; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), 89–118.

a coherence that organizes the disciplines [of the humanities] according to a logic far more credible than that of convenience. If we cannot give an account of this coherence, there can be no credible basis for a defense of the humanities generally, as opposed to the individual disciplines collected under this category.” The coherence disclosed by Panofsky and reprised by Guillory is that all the objects of study of all humanities disciplines exist within historical time rather than in the natural time that all the objects of study of science occupy. Historical time is itself a cultural artifact, characterized by how all its objects are reversibly monuments and documents. Which of the two they present themselves as to a humanist will depend on the perspective of our particular humanistic discipline. Guillory stresses that they come to us “given” as an object of study, unlike the objects of study of the sciences, which, because they exist in natural time, do not possess “monumentality” or “documentality,” and get created by the method(ology) the scientist adopts, in conjunction with instruments that serve the method.

In addition, the constructedness of historical time means that it extends into “long time,” beyond the lifetime of any individual. It is here that monuments become crucial as stopping points for what would otherwise be an endless stream of phenomena. Documents accompany them over long time, providing the backup for their monumentality—something that would be trivial or even unnecessary in natural time.

Any misrepresentations in this summary are not purposeful but result from my limited knowledge of Panofsky, whose many-faceted work I know mostly through its relation to others who have figured more directly in my own studies (Peirce, Cassirer, Morris, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Kuhn, et al.). Unlike Benjamin Jowett (who was not so arrogant as Guillory characterizes him), I am quite ready to apologize. As I understand Panofsky’s view, two interlinked questions arise concerning Guillory’s appropriation of it. They involve how we read Panofsky’s conceptual monument after the accretions of three-quarters of a century and whether his own use of it (as interpretable from the “documental” record) is reconcilable with what Guillory is suggesting.

The dichotomy between natural time and historical time figured prominently in Panofsky’s writings already in the 1920s and had its sources in Simmel’s *The Problem of Historical Time* and Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.<sup>2</sup> Before that, Bergson’s distinction between *temps* and *durée* had made its way into general awareness.<sup>3</sup> Cas-

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2. Georg Simmel, *Das Problem der historischen Zeit* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1916); Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923–29). Simmel’s book appeared in a series codirected by Cassirer.

3. Bergson’s work in this area went back to his doctoral thesis, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889; published in English as *Time and Free Will: Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910]), but it was with the success of

sirer too was widely read, including by art historians, but Panofsky's achievement was to bring the philosophical considerations to bear on the very practical problem of dating artistic "monuments," making Simmel's and Cassirer's concepts real and familiar to an audience whose theoretical interests had their limits. By 1938, the basic notion of the relativity of time and space had made inroads into general culture. Whorf, writing in the same years about Hopi time—how the Hopi language constructs the passage of time differently from what Whorf called the "Standard Average European" languages—could reference certain monuments of quantum physics knowing that his audience would catch them.<sup>4</sup> Whorf's own knowledge of them may have come less from his engineering studies at MIT than from his lifelong engagement with Theosophy, a widespread movement dedicated to reconciling scientific and humanistic perspectives with religion, not in the form of any particular sectarian creed but a set of universal religious principles distilled from Buddhism by the movement's founder, Madame Blavatsky.<sup>5</sup>

This was also the high period of the Unity of Science movement, led by Rudolf Carnap together with his young University of Chicago colleague Charles Morris, the key figure in modern Peircean semiotics. Morris's *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938) was aimed at reconciling the sciences and humanities (though not religion), based on the perception that they were divided by the use of different semiotic systems—in effect, distinct languages.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in the context of Guillory's essay, within the humanities Morris's book was received as a hostile assault: the second issue of the *Kenyon Review*, the organ of the fledgling New Criticism, devoted considerable space to defending itself against what it saw as an attempt by science to usurp the humanities' territory.<sup>7</sup> Morris quickly replied that this was not his intention at all: rather, it was to delimit three separate conceptual and semiotic spheres for the arts, science,

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*L'Évolution créatrice* (1907; published in English as *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell [London: Macmillan, 1911]) that he became internationally known and his earlier works were widely translated.

4. Benjamin Lee Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language" (1939), in *Language, Culture and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*, ed. Leslie Spier (Menasha, WI: Sapir Memorial Publication Fund, 1941), 75–93, and reprinted in *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), 134–59.

5. See John E. Joseph, *From Whitney to Chomsky: Essays in the History of American Linguistics* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002), 93–99.

6. Charles W. Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, ed. Otto Neurath, vol. 1, no. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

7. Eliseo Vivas, Howard Dykema Roelofs, and Philip Blair Rice, "The New Encyclopedists: A Symposium," *Kenyon Review* 1, no. 2 (1939): 159–82; John Crowe Ransom, "Editorial Notes: The Arts and the Philosophers," *Kenyon Review* 1, no. 2 (1939): 194–99.

and technology.<sup>8</sup> This appears to have pacified the New Critics, whose concern lay not with lack of unification but with disciplinary autonomy.

Guillory has staked out a position comparable to that of the New Critics insofar as he wants to see the humanities treated as on a par with the sciences rather than subjugated to them (though in his case the feared subjugation is more financial and administrative than intellectual). Unlike them, he is concerned with unifying, not science and religion like the Theosophists, nor science and the humanities like the logical positivists, but just the humanities, internally. In the post-Saussurean spirit of value-generated-by-difference, Guillory tries to achieve internal unity in part by maximizing the contrast with the sciences, and uses Panofsky to that end, by making the distinction between historical and natural time into the anchor for a defining division between the two areas of academic endeavor.

The documental trail does not suggest that this is a faithful use of how Panofsky himself viewed the monument he created—not that it needs to be. It is perfectly legitimate to adapt a theory or model to some other end than the one for which it is created, though it is helpful to make clear that one is doing so. Whereas Guillory is striving to increase the distance between the sciences and humanities, Johanna Bauman has written concerning Panofsky that “the attempt to reconcile the polarization of knowledge between the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (cultural sciences or humanities), making possible a greater understanding of human culture . . . is one of the central points of ‘The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline.’”<sup>9</sup> That would place Panofsky in the spirit of the Unity of Science program and the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science project that debuted in the same year as Panofsky’s essay.<sup>10</sup> Other documental evidence for his intentions come from his disciple Edgar Wind, notably Wind’s essay “Some Points of Contact between History and the Natural Sciences” (1936), in which, as Bauman puts it, “Wind effects a formal comparison between the methodologies of history and the natural sciences, leading him to conclude that both are objects of human knowledge and experience. Betraying his

8. Charles W. Morris, “Science, Art and Technology,” *Kenyon Review* 1, no. 4 (1939): 409–23.

9. Johanna Bauman, translator’s note for Erwin Panofsky, “Reflections on Historical Time,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 693. Bauman points “for a discussion of the importance of this reconciliation” to Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 213–20; and Sylvia Feretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, trans. Richard Pierce (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 142–47.

10. The program began with Rudolf Carnap’s *The Unity of Science* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1934). The encyclopedia, a planned series of books of which many though not all eventually appeared, was initiated with vols. 1–2 of the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, *Foundations of the Unity of Science*, ed. Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938–39).

hermeneutic roots, Wind declares that both history and science are determined by the observing subject, whose intervention contributes to the final interpretation of data.”<sup>11</sup> Herein lies the main obstacle to Guillory’s attempt to recruit Panofsky for his strategic purposes: humanities and sciences are equally bound to the observing subject’s interpretative choices, despite whatever methods they may devise for limiting (or simply denying) them. This dependency has meant as well that the dichotomy between natural time and historical time has never been epistemologically robust. By the late 1930s Panofsky cannot have failed to know that it was no longer sound, having lost all purchase in physics, wearing away in philosophy under pressure from phenomenologists, but still with just enough of a leg to stand on for his art-historical purposes, so long as his readers understood natural time as what Augustine meant when he said that he knows what time is until someone asks him to define it.

By the end of the twentieth century, within the humanities, concepts such as natural time had collapsed along with other essentialized divisions between the natural and the human—as if what human beings produce is somehow excluded from the realm of nature, and as if the realm of nature is not itself always the product of human conception. As Mary Catherine Bateson put it, with sublime pithiness, “Everything is natural.”<sup>12</sup> If I understand correctly that Guillory would locate the coherence that organizes the humanities into a unified discipline in

- an essential distinction between natural and historical time, correlated with
- the absence or centrality of reversible monument/documents, where
- the sciences inhabit natural time (devoid of monuments/documents) and the humanities inhabit historical time (in which all its objects are monuments/documents),

then I want to know how he will maintain this distinction in the face of decades of evidence and arguments from both science and philosophy that would break it down.

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11. Bauman, translator’s note; Edgar Wind, “Some Points of Contact between History and the Natural Sciences,” in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford: Clarendon; London: Milford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), 255–64. On Wind and Panofsky, see also Tullio Viola, “Peirce and Iconology: Habitus, Embodiment and the Analogy between Philosophy and Architecture,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2012): 6–31.

12. Mary Catherine Bateson, “On the Naturalness of Things,” in *How Things Are: A Science Toolkit for the Mind*, ed. John Brockman and Katinka Matson (New York: Morrow; London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 10. See also John E. Joseph, “The Natural: Its Meanings and Functions in the History of Linguistic Thought,” in *History of Linguistics 2005: Papers from the Tenth International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences (ICHoLS X)*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2–5 Sep. 2005, ed. Douglas A. Kibbee (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007), 1–23.

These point instead to the position Bauman credits to Panofsky, that historical time unites science and the humanities, whence it follows that both scientific and humanistic disciplines can and do deal with monuments and documents—as seems obvious, so long as one is not bound to some idealized vision of science as an ahistorical conveyor belt of endless progress. Some of the monuments/documents of either science or the humanities may get historicized as “natural”; both fields may use instruments, which never speak for themselves but always require interpretation—in their design, construction, implementation, and above all in the handling of the data they supply.

Our debate must not of course leave aside the achievements of the history of science over the last half-century. A conception of science as having objects of study that transcend historical time would be pre-Kuhnian, and, as I have suggested, pre-Panofskyan.<sup>13</sup> It would be as though Latour had never shown how the polarization of Nature versus Subject/Society became the defining characteristic of the “modern” age—and that such a polarization is in fact unsustainable, whence his conclusion that “we have never been modern” and his striving over decades to realize a unified, symmetrical approach to the natural and the historical.<sup>14</sup>

In the present context it bears registering, for documental purposes, that I do not accept the framing premise of Guillory’s article, about the humanities being under “assault.” This is not my experience. In the United Kingdom, cries of complaint are heard from the older and newer ends of the university spectrum: Oxford and Cambridge, used to behaving like medieval guilds and screaming bloody murder at any attempt by governments to make them either socially responsible in their recruitment and treatment of students or accountable for the vast amounts of public money they are allocated; and “new” universities, former polytechnics, and other institutions often with long distinguished histories of training people in practical occupations, which starting in the 1960s were dragged into an ideology that no institution of higher learning had a right to exist unless it offered courses in the humanities. If some of these have subsequently decided internally to reduce their humanities provision and reassert the worthiness of the subject areas in which their traditional strengths lie, surely that is something a humanist worthy of the name ought to support, while of course sympathizing with those teaching in the subjects that are cut back.

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13. The conjunction of Kuhn and Panofsky makes it impossible to omit mention of Ernst Gombrich, the art historian who formulated the notion of “paradigm” more or less simultaneously with Kuhn, in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon; New York: Pantheon, 1960).

14. Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), published in English as *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

In the United States, the university sector is far more diverse (to the point that to speak of an American university system bleaches the word “system” of meaning), and the humanities have been subjected to cutbacks of various kinds in various places. But this does not automatically guarantee that Guillory is right to assume that attempts to defend the humanities based on their general value have failed. People reading his article fifty years from now may get the impression that he wrote it under siege, as barbarian politicians and philistine scientists stormed his SoHo office block. In fact the sector seems to be faring well at New York University, where the Center for the Humanities “is generously supported by funding from the Office of the Provost at NYU and an endowment from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,” and it is heartening to see that its advisory board includes a professor of pediatrics, along with the codirector of the Science and Technology Studies Program in the University’s Polytechnic School of Engineering.<sup>15</sup> This suggests the sort of depolarization that, from a Latourian perspective, offers a genuine way forward, rather than regression.

The criterion set by Guillory for the success of his endeavor is, again, that “if we cannot give an account of this coherence, there can be no credible basis for a defense of the humanities generally, as opposed to the individual disciplines.” Fortunately, this is a false premise: the values-based defenses of the humanities that Guillory rejects define a more credible coherence than the one he offers; they have been a failure only if the benchmark for success is universal celebration and support, or at least as much support as the sciences receive. Not that it isn’t a good idea to challenge the status quo, at least as a thought experiment; a case in point is Wallerstein’s brilliant reimagining of the social sciences, abolishing existing subject areas and regrouping those who inhabit them (whether they do sociology, anthropology, or whatever) into three new departments of nomothetics (general laws), ideographics (particular cases), and grand narratives, since “the social construction of the disciplines as intellectual arenas that was made in the 19th century has outlived its usefulness and is today a major obstacle to serious intellectual work.”<sup>16</sup>

Wallerstein is not trying to project an illusion of coherence by fitting all these disciplines into a Procrustean bed, as Guillory does when he ignores all those core humanities areas—theoretical linguistics, for example, or systematic musicology—in which monuments and documents figure no differently than they do in chemistry or surgery. He could handle such cases by restricting the humanities to just those approaches that

15. Information from <http://nyuhumanities.org/advisory-board/>.

16. Immanuel Wallerstein, “Anthropology, Sociology, and Other Dubious Disciplines,” *Current Anthropology* 44 (2003): 454.



fit Panofsky's conception of historical time, but such a tautology would cast him still more firmly in the role of Procrustes than his taciturnity does.

Both Wallerstein and Guillory are troubled by the limits created by the fences between fields, but Wallerstein recognizes that the variety within each field provides a creative tension that helps to keep any of the camps from settling into a self-satisfied comfort zone. He also has the academic nous to envision the imagined reorganization from the point of view not just of a scholar and teacher but also that of a university administrator, someone who may well be a scholar from within the field, who shares its values so strongly that he or she has taken on the challenge of saving the institution from financial collapse. I am not an administrator, just because I would not wish to be in their shoes, but I wonder whether a provost tasked with cutting costs lest the university go under might not find an essay asserting the deep coherence of the humanities useful when pitching the merger of a dozen departments of art history, history, modern languages and literatures, philosophy, music, and so on, into a single department of humanities. If the professor of moral philosophy and the professor of film studies are fundamentally doing the same thing, do we really need to replace the former when he or she retires, especially since the latter attracts more students?

Guillory's thought-provoking essay has convinced me that those hoping to defend the humanities would do best to focus on their particular disciplines, while not giving up the values-based general defenses that have kept the humanities not only alive but in many respects more diverse and vibrant than at any previous time in history. This is not to say that we have nothing to learn by looking to Panofsky and his contemporaries for guidance, but guidance on the reconciliation they valued, rather than rearguard defensive tactics.

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